DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 904 CS 006 201

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TITLE College Reading Programs: Some Perennial Questions.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (26th, New Orleans, LA, April 27-May 1, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Admission Criteria; *College Programs; Evaluation Criteria; Grading; Higher Education; Program Content; *Program Design; *Program Development; Program Improvement; Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Remedial Programs; *Study Skills

ABSTRACT

Intended for instructors and administrators setting up a college reading and study skills program, this paper presents eight issues that should be carefully considered when developing a program structure that will suit the needs and framework of each institution. Discussions, resolutions, and rationale are provided for the following issues: (1) selecting students for the reading program; (2) whether the program should be voluntary, mandatory, or advised; (3) whether the program should generate academic credit; (4) an appropriate grading system; (5) a method for evaluating student performance in the program; (6) the major objectives of the reading program; (7) the components of the reading program; and (8) improving existing programs. (HTH)

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College Reading Programs: Some Perennial Questions

This paper attempts to examine some of the programmatic concerns that must be addressed when setting up a college reading and study skills program. For each of the issues presented, rationale is provided for more than one resolution or decision. It is up to specific institutions to analyze these arguments and then work toward developing a unique program structure that will suit the needs and the framework of each institution.

HOW SHOULD STUDENTS BE SELECTED FOR THE READING PROGRAM? There are numerous ways of determining a student population for a college reading program. The least complex of these is to require that every student take part in the program. Price (1966) explains "...that regardless of how well you read, you can improve your reading." According to Maxwell (1977), while not necessarily for all students, the reading program should not be limited to those students who do not meet a specified criterion because:

> If a reading and study skills program is restricted to low-ability or low-achieving students, the problem of stigma being associated with the service may be a real one. This may affect student progress in the course...

Clarence Anderson et al. (1974) support this, stating:

> ...if a reading program is to assume its rightful role of leadership in the instructional affairs of a community college, it must emphasize its availability to all segments of the college. It must provide attractive opportunities for students and faculty to improve reading efficiency and effectiveness.

The most common existing situation appears to be the use of a standardized reading pre-test. An institutional cut-off score then separates reading program candidates from non-candidates.

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While a standardized test is fairly easy to employ, there are many drawbacks to using such a test for program placement.

Farr (1969) points out that "standardized tests, the most common device for measuring reading ability, divide reading into a number of sub-skill areas. In every instance, this division is arbitrary since there is almost no research evidence supporting it."

Farr continues to explain that measuring reading comprehension is an extremely complex task. Among the factors that must be considered, he lists:

> length, interest-appeal, subject matter, reading difficulty, and organization of the material to be read; the reader's purpose, mental set, environmental conditions for reading, and command of basic decoding skills; the type of question to be used; and whether examinees are allowed to look back at the selection when answering questions.

According to Pauk (1969):

> ...present reading tests are artificial in that they do not measure the real type of school work the student must do and the manner in which he habitually does it... Almost all of the reading which a student must do is the reading given in assignments. There are no short time limits. Even without time limits there are some students who move through their homework rapidly just to get it over with. While other students, having great persistence and discipline, stick with the assignments until they master them. In such cases persistence and discipline are the ingredients which make for academic problems or successes.

In addition, Alexander (1977) cautions:

> ...before standardized placement tests are selected, they must be analyzed to determine what skills they measure, and to what degree they correspond with program objectives.

Any of the other, global weaknesses or questions about standardized test usage--such as time limits, biases, and affective factors--would also come into question.

Another avenue of referral to the reading program is through recommendation of counselors and faculty. This method can be effective if the faculty and staff are well aware of what the reading program can do for students and if these persons are looking at the reading and study skills of students in the general population.

Self-referral is another possibility. While the self-referred student may be highly motivated for the program, what of the student who then cannot find room in the program because of the students with far better skills who have enrolled? In other words, is a priority system needed?

These methods do not have to be used independently of each other. The possibility exists of combining one or more of these avenues of selection.

The manner of student selection employed by a college reading program relates directly to the next question--SHOULD PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM BE VOLUNTARY, MANDATORY OR ADVISED?

Obviously, if a program requires that all freshmen and transfer students take a reading course, then that program will operate with a mandatory enrollment.

On the other end of the spectrum, if participation is on the basis of self-referral, then a program is operating with voluntary enrollment.

This determination isn't always in terms of the whole student population. For example, a cut-off score may be decreed on a placement test for entering students. Those who score below the cut-off are so notified--are these students then required or advised to register for reading?

Fairbanks (1974) found that "Voluntary programs were reported as 'successful' significantly more often than required programs."

According to Maxwell (1971):

> If the reading program is a voluntary one, students who enter it may be more highly motivated than those who have not sought help even though they need it equally as much.

However, Colvin (1961) points out that voluntary programs may have a serious weakness because of this voluntary status of enrollment which fails to reach all needy students.

The next perennial question is that of academic credit. SHOULD THE COLLEGE READING PROGRAM GENERATE ACADEMIC CREDIT?

Before a discussion of credit, one must differentiate between actual credit, partial credit and in-house or add-on credit. Actual credit is the same credit status awarded to other college courses in a specific institution. Partial credit is actual credit granted somewhat differently. Perhaps the students have greater contact hours or are required to take two semesters work for the credit of one. They are awarded credit but it is only for a partial amount. Add-on or in-house credit does not count for graduation. It shows up on transcripts and does count toward full-time status and is important for such matters as work-study or financial aid. If courses carrying add-on credit are required for graduation, then the total number of credits needed to graduate is increased.

The arguments for granting academic credit seem to follow an affective line of reasoning. Schiavone (1973) ties high attrition rates to not offering credit. He stipulates that if the reading courses are not given for credit, then the student should be taking credit-bearing courses simultaneously in order to develop the student's perception of himself as a college student.

One faculty, polled by the New York Times (1976), noted that "there's enough of a stigma without denying credit. If you stack too much against the students, they lose all incentive to work."

Ross and Roe (1973) share the results of a change in policy from not offering credit to offering credit for a reading course:

> When no credit was offered, less than twenty students participated each quarter, and the dropout rate exceeded 50 percent. The decision to offer three hours of credit resulted in a sharp rise in enrollment to 250 or more per quarter and thus enabled the course to serve far more students. The withdrawal rate since the addition of credit decreased to 2 percent.

Brown (1965) defends the larger issue of reading skills being taught in college courses, credit being a part of the argument:

> Reading skills are of such nature that they can be improved continuously and at any level of schooling. If we accept this observation and agree that the purpose of reading improvement programs at any institution ought to be that of helping the otherwise qualified student get the most out of his educational opportunities, then we can justify such a program at the most mundane trade school and at the most quality conscious university.

The case against reading courses generating academic credit usually argues that the students would gain credit toward their degrees for what amounts to high school work taken in college. It is sometimes said that students don't work as hard or cover as much material as they do in other courses--although I know of no research that would bear this out--the curriculum and goals of a reading program being limitless for each individual. This case also reasons that the university or college should assume that the reading abilities of the student body are up to the standards needed for successful college study.

WHAT TYPE OF GRADING SYSTEM IS APPROPRIATE? The major division here comes between the letter grade and the S/U or Pass/Fail distinctions. The argument of whether or not to give grades at all is a large and complex one encountering bureaucratic and philosophical

concerns beyond the scope of this discussion.

Within the framework of grading, one unique option that may be possible to institute in an ongoing system is a variation of the incomplete. This incomplete- hold or similarly named incomplete is the procedure often used for doctoral dissertation study and other long range projects. The student is granted No Credit or In Progress at the end of the marking period, but these accumulated designations turn to passes when the final project or reading course is completed. This system is interesting for reading improvement because it views the process as one that is not necessarily correlated with a certain length of time such as a quarter, a module or a semester.

The problems of P/F or letter grades for reading programs are similar to the questions arising about these systems in other grading situations. A P/F grade is easier to determine than a letter grade--however, the student who is barely squeaking by will get the same grade as an outstanding student. P/F/Honors addresses this situation but begins to bring us back to the letter gradations with new names.

Most important perhaps, is that the college reading course should probably have the same type of grading system as other similar courses throughout the institution.

Grading Systems lead us to a perhaps more complex issue: HOW SHOULD EVALUATION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN THE READING PROGRAM OCCUR?

There are 2 major issues:

-Should student performance be evaluated according to a predetermined mastery level or according to individual growth or progress?

-What types of instruments and processes should be used for this evaluation?

The use of a mastery level or criterion is objective and is easy to determine. However, students may be set up or programmed for

failure if they most likely will not be able to reach this level at the end of the course despite great progress or improvement.

Individual growth as a measure of performance also has problems--gains may be plentiful for a student but this student may still have a long way to go. Academic credit for this type of progress may be difficult to justify. Robertann (1967) raises the point that individual growth as a measuring stick may be considered incongruous with life or with college demands "since it bases rewards on efforts rather than on actual accomplishments." If students are passing reading courses but failing college academic courses they may in reality be wallowing in a supportive holding tank.

The methods or instruments chosen for evaluation of student performance also may lead to questions. It should be noted that often the same methods may be employed whether you are using mastery level or individual growth as your determinants for success--only the interpretation will differ. For example: if a standardized test is used, the program opting for mastery level will look for attainment of a cut-off score. The program choosing individual growth will look at the same test in terms of pre-test-- post-test increase.

Again the weaknesses of standardized tests enter our discussion. Does the test reflect the objectives of the program completed? Are affective factors considered? And, as Farr (1969) points out:

> Results in any pre-test, post-test situation are always influenced because the student usually works harder on the post-test knowing that he is being evaluated on the basis of the difference between his initial and final performance.

According to Alexander (1977):

> In discussing evaluation of students' performance, one cannot omit the teacher-made objective test which tests those skills which are taught in a specific program. An advantage is that this type of test relates directly to each program, but a disadvantage is the lack of experience of many teachers in constructing test items. It is suggested that a sheet be prepared showing the

relationship between test items, what they purport to measure, and specific objectives of the course.

Farr (1969) states that:

> The problems of combining teacher evaluations with test evaluations should be thoroughly explored. If teacher and test evaluations could be combined, it would most likely lead to more reliable measure.

Another possibility is student self-evaluation as a weight in grading. Kirschenbaum (1973) makes a distinction between self-evaluation and self-grading:

> There is a difference between self-evaluation and self-grading. In the former, the student evaluates his own progress, strengths, weaknesses and future goals in writing or in the conference with his teacher. In self-grading the student determines or helps to determine his own grade. Presumably self-grading cannot take place without prior self-evaluation. On the other hand, many schools have self-evaluation but not self-grading.

Farr (1969) indicates that:

> While it has been well established that self-evaluations are a sound procedure in psychology, it has yet to be shown that it is sound practice in evaluating student reading abilities. There is also sparse research evidence supporting the validity of student self-evaluation in terms of assessing performance.

The more measures that are employed in student evaluation, the lesser the effect of the weaknesses of any one specific measure. This is especially important if the standardized test is the primary instrument of assessment of student performance.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE MAJOR OBJECTIVES OF A COLLEGE READING PROGRAM? This does not refer to behavioral objectives but rather what might be considered "philosophical overviews" of the college reading program.

According to Colvin (1962):

> A basic objective of the reading program is to improve reading and study skills rather than to promise academic success as a result of the course. Although it is hoped that the program will effect better grades, this is not its primary objective.

He adds that:

> ...carefully thought-out statements of objectives will make us

> accountable to our clientele and will cause us to examine at length and depth what we claim about college reading.

Dennis (1971) cautions that objectives should be workable--that is:

> the objectives must be realizable within the time limits of the remainder of term and that there must be some congruence between the objectives, the procedure, and the evaluation devices.

Objectives also must be developed in concert with the particular needs of specific student populations and according to particular institutional philosophies.

In order to realize program objectives, WHAT ARE POSSIBLE MAJOR COMPONENTS OF A COLLEGE READING PROGRAM?

The term component is often used interchangeably with objective to mean the emphasis or emphases for a reading program.

As early as 1946--McCullough, Strang and Traxler came up with a list of expectations similar to those found today. According to this listing, when a student leaves college, he should be able:

1. To find the reading materials he needs.
2. To adjust his rate of comprehension and method of reading to the material and his purpose.
3. To comprehend accurately what the author has said.
4. To judge the soundness of the author's ideas and draw valid inferences and conclusions.
5. To appreciate beauty of style and expression.
6. To synthesize ideas gained from reading with his other experience.
7. To "read between the lines."
8. To discriminate between facts and opinions, between acceptable evidence and propaganda.
9. To remember and use ideas from his reading.
10. To use reading as a stimulus to creative thinking and to the discovery of new problems for study.

McCullough, Strang and Traxler state that "these reading abilities are likely to be the fruits of his growing conviction regarding the importance

of reading to him personally, as well as in the world today, and of his growth in ability to plan and carry out an appropriate individual program of self-improvement in reading."

Schiavone (1973) states that ideally the college reading program should emphasize "comprehension, vocabulary development, and reading rate." Colvin (1962) concurs, adding the dimension of study skills. Geerlogs and Kling (1968) surveyed college reading programs and found the following objectives or components were most frequently highlighted: comprehension, flexibility, rate, study skills and vocabulary. It does appear that comprehension is the major component most often found and desired in college reading programs.

HOW CAN COLLEGE READING PROGRAMS BE IMPROVED? This is a difficult question to answer in global or general terms as it is impossible to determine how a program can be improved without a clear conception of that program in particular.

However, there are some suggestions for improvement that do come to the minds of involved professionals. Some of these such as budget, space, FTE, and time are often tied in to institution-wide concerns or national trends and are being felt throughout higher education. Other are more specific in nature and relate more directly to the reading program.

One of these is the desire for increased visibility or recognition on campus, and for a clearer understanding of the reading program by faculty, administrators and the community.

Another is the desire for increased interaction between reading faculty and content area faculty, leading at times to interdisciplinary and team approaches to improving student reading in content fields.

College reading and study skills programs might be improved by looking at and hammering out possible solutions to the questions posed in this paper. . .not looking at these in isolation but, rather, as intertwining programmatic concerns that potentially form and reflect the philosophy and goals of a program.

We should not be looking for a hypothetical model to be recommended for universal application. What each post-secondary school needs is a program developed to meet the unique needs and concerns of their specific population and institution.

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